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INTERDISCIPLINARY COOPERATION IN THE MAKING AND USE OF FIELD TAPES IN AFRICAN LANGUAGES, A PRELIMINARY STATEMENT.

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THE ANTHROPOLOGIST, THE DESCRIPTIVE LINGUIST, AND THE AUTHOR OF A LANGUAGE TEXT HAVE DIFFERENT GOALS IN RECORDING LANGUAGES IN THE FIELD. THE ANTHROPOLOGIST/ETHNOGRAPHER, HOWEVER, CAN ASSEMBLE FIELD TAPES WHICH WILL NOT ONLY FULFILL HIS PURPOSE BUT WILL ALSO SERVE AS A BASIS FOR DESCRIPTIVE STUDY AND AS RAW MATERIAL FOR A PEDAGOGICAL TREATMENT OF THE LANGUAGE. THE FIRST STEP IS TO CHOOSE TOPICS OF INTEREST TO BOTH THE BEGINNING STUDENT AND THE ANTHROPOLOGIST (GREETINGS, DIRECTIONS, CONVENTIONS). ALTHOUGH THE SUBJECT AND MANNER OF RECORDING IS PLANNED, RECORDING SESSIONS MUST BE IMPROMPTU--WITHOUT PRACTICE AND IN 30-60 SECOND SEGMENTS. THE TEXT CAN BE A MONOLOG, A DIALOG, A CONVERGENT MONOLOG (REPETITION BY THE SAME SPEAKER), OR AN ANTIPHONAL MONOLOG (REPETITION BY ANOTHER NATIVE SPEAKER). THE GOAL IN PLANNING THE RECORDING IS TO CONTROL GRAMMATICAL COMPLEXITY AND VOCABULARY WITHOUT KILLING SPONTANEITY AND AUTHENTICITY. EXPERIENCE HAS SHOWN THAT 2 TO 3 HOURS OF RECORDING PRODUCE 1 HOUR OF USABLE TAPE. FURTHER PROCESSING TO PRODUCE A TAPE FOR STUDENT USE TAKES ABOUT 6 HOURS AND CAN BE DONE BY THE PERSON PREPARING PEDAGOGICAL MATERIALS. (JD)

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INTERDISCIPLINARY COOPERATION IN THE MAKING AND USE OF FIELD TAPES IN AFRICAN LANGUAGES

A PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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0. Purpose of this statement

The anthropologist, the descriptive linguist, and the language teacher all make and use tape recordings of foreign languages. The tapes made by one are too often virtually useless to the others. But with the less frequently studied languages, recording time and the time of professional personnel in any of these three specialties is scarce. Maximum cooperation and minimum duplication of effort are therefore desirable.

Both the descriptivist and the language teacher want recorded materials that are in some way controlled, rather than completely random. The descriptivist asks, in addition, that a high proportion of the corpus which he examines be reasonably natural and spontaneous, but he is not too particular about the subject matter. The language teacher is intent on having clearly recorded model sentences and structural drills, on general topics which he has chosen. The anthropologist/ethnologist is interested in content, but only secondarily in acoustic quality or in the control of grammar and vocabulary.

The purpose of this note is to suggest ways in which a field worker, particularly in anthropological/ethnographic studies, can assemble tapes which, while useful both as a basis for descriptive study and as raw material for a pedagogical treatment of the language, will also be of practical and professional interest to himself. The techniques described have been developed in the course of extensive work in the description and teaching of African languages particularly during the past five years.

1. Subject Matter

Pedagogical grammars are usually aimed at prospective new participants in the society that uses the language. For this reason, some subjects that are of intense interest to ethnology would be inappropriate as major topics in a set of

beginning language lessons. Examples are cultic practices, technological processes, and folk stories. But many other subjects are of interest to both, particularly insofar as the ethnologist is himself a relatively new participant in the society. Such are greetings, road directions, conventions for buying and selling, and many others. The first step is therefore to make a list of general areas in which all new participants have a strong interest.

The next step is to subdivide each of the most general areas of interest into more specific areas: 'greetings' must be differentiated according to the age, sex, status, current activity, etc. of the speakers. Buying and selling may take place in a shop, or at the kitchen door, or elsewhere.

The third step in choosing subject matter is to convert each of the resultant subtopics into a set of overlapping 'assignments' which will be given to the speakers who make the tape. Overlapping may be assured by focussing on some one person, object, or event, and looking at it from several points of view: if the focus is on 'bicycles', then one assignment may be to discuss who uses bicycles and for what purposes; another may be to discuss the merits of a particular bicycle that one person wants to sell to another; a third may describe how to care for a bicycle, and so forth. Or one may focus on several different things, from a single point of view: the physical properties and principal uses of a series of artifacts may be discussed, or the locations of various landmarks may be described.

2. Recording procedures

Once having assembled a list of overlapping 'assignments' on each of several subtopics, the investigator is ready to begin the recording session. It is unnecessary in this note to go into detail about the mechanics of recording: damping of room echo through use of rugs, mats, or blankets; having the microphone about six inches from

the speaker's mouth, but out of the way of direct impact of the air stream; using half or full track recording, at the highest tape speed available. These are particularly important, however, when the tape is later to be copied and used by colleagues in other disciplines.

In the conduct of the recording session itself, two points have proved to be both practicable and essential. First, recording must be impromptu. That is, the speaker should begin to talk only a few seconds after each 'assignment' has been explained to him. Under these conditions, grammar is usually relatively simple, and clichés abound. The second requirement is that the recording should be ended--in the middle of a sentence if necessary--after 30 - 60 sec. The reason is that the concentration of cliché material drops off sharply after speakers have begun to get their bearings in a new assignment. No restrictions are placed on grammar or vocabulary.

Three types of short impromptu text have proved particularly useful: straight texts (either dialogs or monologs), convergent monologs, and antiphonal monologs.

Little need be said about straight texts. Each 'assignment' is recorded only once. In the case of dialogs, which frequently become quite animated, the investigator may suggest that the participants try to keep from interrupting one another, since overlapping of voices greatly complicates the processing of the tapes (see below).

In recording 'convergent monologs', the informant improvises for 30 - 60 sec. on the assignment. The recorder is then stopped, and he is instructed to 'try to say the same thing again, without adding anything or leaving anything out.' The process is repeated until 3 - 5 versions of the same monolog have been recorded. Typically, the first attempt contains hesitations and false starts, but successive tellings converge on a stable, fairly smooth version. Finally, the informant may be asked to say the

same thing, but in short, simple sentences as if talking to a child.

'Antiphonal monologs' make use of two informants, one of whom improvises on the assignment. As he finishes each sentence, the other repeats it after him, slowly, with any dialectal or stylistic changes that are natural to him. If desired, the same assignment may be covered in a second recording, with the informants exchanging roles.

Each type of text has its advantages for the descriptive linguist. Dialogs of course illustrate such things as first and second persons, courtesy forms, questions, hesitation forms, and attention signals much better than monologs. Monologs are easier to process. Convergent monologs provide numerous examples of repetition and free variation, without the informant being in the artificial situation of repeating an utterance immediately just for the sake of repeating. Antiphonal monologs allow the originating informant to collect his thoughts while each sentence is being repeated by his partner, and the stylistic or dialectal variants provided by the second speaker are of interest.

From the point of view of one who is learning the language, or preparing lessons in it, the value of the materials we have described lies in the fact that grammatical complexity and recurrence of vocabulary are controlled without killing spontaneity and authenticity.

Lessons developed from materials of this kind may be used successfully just as soon as the student has come to be at home with the sound system and the principal grammatical features of the language.

3. Processing the original tapes

Processing of raw tapes gathered in this way must take into account the need of the student for an imitable version of the sometimes quite rapid and contracted speech of the original. A slow, but still natural ('lento') revoicing may

be made in either of two ways. If there is plenty of time and only one machine, a written transcript may be made, and this may be read onto a second tape. If time is short and two machines are available, the original may be 'exploded' in this manner: Machine A, which has two output plugs, is connected to Machine B, which has two inputs. One output of A is connected directly to one input of B. The other output of A is to a headset, worn by an informant. The informant speaks into a microphone which goes into the second input of B. The operator copies the first 30-60 sec. 'assignment' from A to B, as the informant listens. He then stops B, and rewinds A to the beginning of the same assignment. He then starts B recording, plays the first phrase from A, and stops A but not B. The informant gives a lento repetition of the phrase and then gives a rough translation of it. The operator then plays the next phrase from A, and so on through the assignment. The tape which is thus produced on B becomes the source of the pedagogical tape: individual phrases of the lento or the original version may be copied from it, in any combination and with pauses of any desired length, onto a third tape which is used by the student himself.

The amount of time needed to assemble materials in this way is not prohibitive. Considerable experience has shown that, if the assignments have been outlined in advance, each hour of original tape requires 2-3 hours of recording time, and exploding requires about 6 hours. (The time for making the pedagogical tape is of course expended not by the collector of the original, but by the person who is preparing the pedagogical materials.) Forty clock hours of recording and exploding may thus be expected to produce at least four hours of original tapes ready for use by a linguist or a textbook writer who himself knows little of the language. This much material is an excellent supplement-- or an excellent start--for either kind of work.

Pedagogical postscript:

Overlapping monologues also work well live in class. After the instructor has given the monolog three or four times, students may ask questions for clarifaction of new words or unfamiliar structures. Then the instructor gives the monolog again and asks simple questions about it. Finally, students try to retell the same material, in part or as a whole. This basic procedure may of course be elaborated in any number of ways. It has served me well with semi-literate instructors and with instructors who were university graduates, in languages as diverse as Shona and French.

Replies to any of these questions will be gratefully received:

1. Is the statement clear? If not, where not?

2. How might it more accurately reflect the interests of descriptive linguists?

3. How might the suggested procedures be made more practicable?

4. Is the statement, as it stands, likely to elicit usable tapes from anthropological field workers?

   If not, how could it be made more effective for this purpose?

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